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ABSTRACT

Problems related to the study of second language learners are described, and the factors affecting language development are discussed. Factors influential in second language learning include psychological, sociological, and affective aspects. Similarly, the measurement of language has been influenced by linguistic, psychological, and social theory. The rise of bilingual and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs has also resulted in new terminology for both language dominance and language proficiency with respect to limited- or non-English-speaking populations, and these terms have added to the misinterpretations and misconceptions already existing in the language field. The identification of language dominance patterns is primarily a diagnostic function, and does not necessarily indicate the language in which content should be taught. The formal language on which measures are frequently based may be unfamiliar to the student. In the press for classification, many errors are made in specifying the child's level of control of a second language. Language proficiency in one context may be inadequate in other contexts. Community and cultural group attitudes are important factors in second language learning. All these are viable considerations in language acquisition success and failure, but are often ignored in studying the language learner. (MSE)

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Problems in the Study of Second Language Learners

Andrés Barona and Cynthia González

Problems related to the study of second language learners are described. Factors affecting language development are discussed, along with the difficulties experienced by professionals in defining terms and aspects of language assessment. Considerations and cautions related to the measurement of language skills are presented.

For the most part, achieving proficiency in one's first language is easier than achieving proficiency in a second language where skills can vary to differing degrees. Nonetheless, many factors have been considered as being influential in second language learning. These include psychological, sociological, and affective aspects. The psychological effects involved in second language learning situations where subject matter deficits and failures have occurred can become increasingly difficult to overcome or recover from (Saville-Troike, 1973). Such situations tend to contribute to low self-images and may decrease motivation. Sociological aspects may involve the degree to which the child's native language is accepted and valued by parents and community alike (Saville-Troike, 1973). Negative attitudes and actions can be perceived as rejections of a child's language and cultural experience while suggesting inferiority. Spurred by fears of such failures and rejections, affective factors serve to increase an individual's anxiety and pervasive feelings of alienation from the dominant culture.

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ment, criticized for its subjectivity in the hands of classroom teachers (Spolsky, 1978), was substantially influenced by more formal methods adopted from structural linguistics and behavioral psychology (Lado, 1957). These theories, which advocate studying communication "habits" (Lado, 1957) and measuring or evaluating discrete items or elements of language, contribute to and reinforce the need for validity and reliability of language assessment techniques (Genessee, 1981). Sociolinguists have contributed the notion of speech style or language variety stemming from the social and psychological variables that are involved during interpersonal communication (Genessee, 1981). While influential, these theories alone have failed to provide a sound basis for assessing communicative competence (Genessee, 1981), and the use of informal language testing continues to be supported for classroom purposes. Recently, the notion of communicative competence has gained credibility. By considering the situation in which communication takes place and focusing on the interaction between social and psychological variables, it has been found that this interaction results in meaningful communicative interaction for the second language learner, thus producing more competent speakers (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Federal and state legislation has recognized the existence of a large number of bilingual or non-English speaking school-aged children (Paulston, 1980). As a result, bilingual education and English as second language (ESL) programs were created. With their creation came a need to develop language assessment instruments in order to determine the need for such programs as well as to establish entry and exit criteria for these classes. The many factors involved in the area of language proficiency (psychological, sociological, linguistic, and affective) have yielded many approaches to language assessment by researchers and academicians from a variety of disciplines, as well as by those involved in educating minority children.

In addition to creating a strong interest in and need for language assessment instruments, the rise of bilingual education and ESL programs also resulted in a multitude of new terms that attempted to delineate both language dominance and language proficiency with respect to limited or non-English-speaking populations. These terms will be briefly reviewed before continuing the present discussion.

DEFINING ABSTRACT TERMS

The multiplicity of terms used to describe various aspects of language assessment have served only to add to the misinterpretations, misconceptions, and conflicting theoretical frameworks already existing in this field. Such terms as *language proficiency*, *language dominance*, *bilingual*, *limited English speaker*, *communicative competence*, *linguisticcompetence*, *primary language*, and *home language* are included in the jargon subset that has been created. In many cases, the terms have been incompletely or vaguely defined and have added to the already abundant confusion in the field of language learning. For example, *limited-English-proficient* has been used to justify the placement of non-English speakers into total immersion English classes or the instruction of children whose functional language has been shown to be English in their primary language (Baecher, 1981). While decisions based on interpretations of this term lack logic and consistency, they are nevertheless a commonplace reality.

Although the term *language proficiency* is commonly used, it has been plagued by vague descriptions that have resulted in the formation of rather ambiguous concepts (Hernández-Chávez, Burt, & Dulay, 1978). The term has been defined as the "degree to which an individual exhibits control over the use of the rules of a language for one, some, or all of its numerous and diverse aspects" (Burt & Dulay, 1978, p. 178), although it has been stressed that proficiency in one language does not imply a lack of proficiency in another (in reference to bilingualism). Similarly, *language dominance*, defined as the "degree of relative proficiency of an individual with respect to more than one language" should not be interpreted to imply dominance in all aspects of language (Burt & Dulay, 1978). For example, it is possible for a child to manipulate the first language system well but to simultaneously possess a more active vocabulary in the second language within specific settings, such as the school.

The terms *home language* and *primary language* are frequently used synonomously, although differences exist between the two terms. Whereas *home language* refers simply to the use of a language in a child's home by his or her parents, *primary* language refers to the language acquired initially during the first five years of life. The noncommunicative nature of the terms has been pointed out by Burt and Dulay (1978) who hold that a child's language dominance cannot be assumed on the basis of knowing only the home language; the language used by residents

of a household does not imply that the child is dominant or proficient in that same language.

Similarly, varying definitions have been given to the term *bilingual*. For the most part, these definitions have been rather broad and have resulted in somewhat misleading use. While generally the term refers to the ability to use two languages effectively (Hornby, 1977), it has also been used to describe "any individual who lives in a home where a first language other than English is spoken by one or more members of the household" (Burt & Dulay, 1978, p. 77). The latter definition is in keeping with that used in the *Survey of Language Supplement* to the July, 1975 Current Population Survey done by Waggoner (1978). Ironically, that description seems contradictory to their previous statement regarding proficiency and dominance implications within a given household.

Such terms as *limited-English-speaker* refer to individuals whose native language is one other than English. Here, *native language* refers to the language normally used by the individual or a child's parents (Waggoner, 1978).

The term *communicative competence* has been used extensively. Usage of the term has varied from only knowing the rules of a language to knowing and demonstrating grammatical, contextual, and sociolinguistic competencies (Swain & Canale, 1981). One definition describes *communicative competence* as the ability to transmit messages successfully by using linguistic or nonlinguistic means regardless of grammatical or sociolinguistic appropriateness. It has been argued that the ability to achieve a successful communication constitutes the real difference between proficiency and nonproficiency in a language (Swain & Canale, 1981). However, there are arguments against this notion.

Although defining communicative competence is a complex and difficult task, it has been generally accepted that communication is based upon interaction and is therefore unpredictable (Genessee, 1981). Recently, the view that communicative competence should be considered within a broad, culturally based framework including but not confined to the child's school language (Rivera & Simich, 1981) and that both the prediction and description of communicative competence are achieved by the measurement of all aspects of language has been espoused. This latter view has gained acceptance in proficiency assessment circles in recent years (Rivera & Simich, 1981).

Clearly, consensus has not yet been reached on many of the essential aspects involved in determining proficiency. As Genessee (1981) realistically pointed out, "We cannot test what we cannot describe" (p.33). Thus, major drawbacks appear to exist in the assessment of language proficiency.

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE PASSING JUDGMENT

Identifying dominance patterns is primarily done for diagnostic purposes. However, the dominance assessment procedure does not necessarily provide the planner with a decision as to the language in which the content areas should be taught (Ramírez, 1979). Many times, this decision is based on such factors as the availability of materials and personnel, the ease with which the content material can be interpreted, and the degree to which the material is culture-bound. Proper interpretation of both languages is necessary so that a balance of proficiency levels is maintained and so that certain domains are not bound to a particular language (Ramírez, 1979).

Assessment of language has focused on formal or standard language with little consideration given to the assessment of functional language. It is possible to possess competence not reflected in formal assessment by excluding the language from the home environment. A child's command of language can be adequate in a reduced context or in familiar conversation and yet be seen as not functional in a more formal environment such as the school (McLaughlin, 1982).

In the press for classification, many errors have been made in understating or overestimating a child's control of a second language. Indeed, one of the most frequently made errors concerns the labeling of children as bilingual. A child who enters school speaking only Spanish is frequently termed bilingual, obviously falsely. Similarly, other children are labeled bilingual simply because two languages are spoken in the home and not because fluency has been demonstrated in both languages. Unfortunately, facility in pronunciation, (that is, oral fluency) is often equated with proficiency when, in actuality, it usually precedes reading and writing fluency (McLaughlin, 1982). Too often, children quick to catch on to linguistic signals and gestures create an impression of being language proficient without necessarily having full control or function in the second language.

As a result of these pitfalls, language skill must be carefully interpreted because of the complexity of what it implies (Young, 1982). Possessing language skill does not ensure that the student possesses the kind of skill required by the public school. Indeed, such a student can be considered to be language deficient, (that is, unable to make efficient use of available vocabulary when in an unfamiliar environment). This situation may develop without the student being unlearned in the areas of either grammar or vocabulary (Young, 1973). Here, a distinction is made between *competence* and *performance*, that is, knowledge about a language versus how language is actually used. With this in mind, it is suggested that linguistic deficiencies cannot be assessed on the basis of performance alone.

Another drawback to the assessment of linguistic competency is the content of many of the language measures. Both linguistic competence and communicative competence have been associated with the learning of "cultural trivia rules," since learning another culture requires learning appropriate social uses of language (Paulston, 1978). The formal language that the measures are frequently based on is generally unfamiliar to the student, whose local cultural values and customs may differ significantly from what is presented in the assessment instrument.

A so-called bilingual student may be at a distinct disadvantage when formal language is involved; not only is it necessary for the student to be familiar with local colloquialisms and customs in both the native language and English, but now there is the added need for knowledge of what is essentially a third and new language.

The uses made of both English and Spanish by the Mexican-American population in the southwestern United States have been found to vary across social situations as well as across individuals (Holloman, 1976). This finding provides support for the need to examine a student's language use and proficiency in the familiar contexts of the home, school, and general environment to determine contextual appropriateness. Additionally, it has been recommended that strategically oriented classroom material be used when teaching the second language learner (DiPietro, 1981), with more generalizable modes of instruction needed to facilitate the application of classroom learning to real-life and situational communication. In other words, learning the target culture language is not sufficient if it cannot be effectively

reproduced in the appropriate situation away from the classroom environment (Griffin, 1979).

McLaughlin (1978) presents evidence for and against a hypothetical "critical period" in childhood, existing between the ages of 2 years and puberty, during which a child's greatest capacity for language learning exists, a capacity that the adult has lost. Support for and arguments against this notion are founded in biological or physiological viewpoints. Although arguments against this critical period hypothesis have appeared to weaken and restrict its interpretation (McLaughlin, 1978), speculation remains over the notion that a child seems to acquire language more easily than does an adult. Therefore, most techniques for language learning have been developed for use with children. Consequently, the learner who enters the system past this period often must endure the indignity of learning strategies designed for or developed with the younger child in mind.

Home language has been considered an asset to second language learning because the child is able to transfer previously acquired knowledge (Galarza, 1977). Successful transfer of this knowledge, however, is often dependent on community support, which usually serves as a model to the child. Sociolinguistic surveys have been found to be helpful in determining language use, proficiency, and attitudes toward both languages and social groups (Holloman, 1977). Too often, though, these same surveys are utilized only as a matter of formality by systems determined to dictate their own curricular priorities, refusing to allow the survey to speak for itself. Legarreta (1977) discusses language choices in Spanish bilingual classrooms and reaffirms our preceding statement. As an example, a bilingual classroom was designed to use the children's native language (in this case Spanish) and English in equal percentages. In actuality, however, far less time was spent in the dominant language, thus conveying the impression that English is a more acceptable form of communication. In spite of scientific efforts, it seems that teachers and aides most often were prone to revert to the use of English, particularly when important functions such as directives, amplification, and positive acceptance were used. More importantly, the language choices of teachers and aides "did not reflect the ethnic mix nor the communicative repertoires" of the classroom (Legarreta, 1977).

AFFECTIVE ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

The amount of social distance between two groups often determines the ease with which the second language learner acquires the target language (Schumann, 1976). Attitudes toward the self, the native language group, the target language group, and acquired proficiency in English as a second language were studied in Mexican-American women in the Southwest (Oller, Baca, & Vigil, 1977). The women, aged 16 to 23 years, had an ESL education average of 1.87 years and appeared to be anti-integrative. The authors explained this phenomenon as being a product of the "colonized minority who still feel the oppressive weights of being absorbed into a powerful political system in which they traditionally had little power of choice." Whatever the reasons for the attitudes, it is important to remember that children's attitudes are shaped by the community in which they live. The effects of community or cultural group attitudes should thus be considered extremely important factors in the area of second language acquisition.

There are conflicting estimates regarding the length of time it takes a child to become proficient in a language. Obviously, the amount of exposure to a language to be acquired contributes greatly to the rate of language learning. It is a commonly accepted notion that the school plays a decisive role in developing self-concepts and knowledge. It also should be recognized that the role of the home and family in language learning may be as or even more important. Knowledge and language obtained from the home can either be strengthened or ignored by the school; similarly, the home environment can attribute greater or lesser importance to school-generated skills and concepts. Unless home and school function cooperatively, a student's progress can be seriously hindered. The proper shaping and reinforcement of learning can be enhanced by becoming more closely aware of attitudes and priorities prevailing between these two influential forces in a child's life.

A school's attitude about the minority child's language and background directly affects the child's own attitude about the self and the home environment. Often, the trauma induced by social situations produces negative attitudes and deteriorates self-concept, and can only be deemed detrimental to both learning and assimilation and acculturation processes (Alptekin 1981). Until recently, many schools were alienating language-minority parents by failing to reflect the cultural beliefs, values, and

general worth of the minority group. However, it is essential that these efforts be maintained so that any existing social distance between home and school is minimized.

It has been suggested that while immigrants and foreign students experience similarities in the process of becoming acculturated, one principal difference exists: immigrants choose to settle in the "target outline" while foreign students, considering themselves to be temporary residents, lack a strong urge to assimilate in the new culture (Alptekin, 1981). As a result, it may be necessary to distinguish between these two groups of second language learners so that disparate attitudinal factors might be recognized and dealt with. This point is not meant to imply that the immigrant is totally accepting of any and all target culture impositions. In actuality, any positive attitude can easily be altered when confronted with either hostility, ill regard, or insensitivity, as is often the case.

The issue of identity conflict is increasingly becoming of interest to researchers in the field of second language learning (Alptekin, 1981; Brown, 1973; Clarke, 1976; Schumann, 1976). To become assimilated and acculturated into a new society often requires some degree of rejection of one's own culture. An individual who becomes alienated from the native culture without at the same time feeling adequately accepted by the target culture is extremely vulnerable. Learning potential—from a psychological standpoint—may be seriously decreased because of the absence of a support social network. This alienation combined with culture shock and stress puts the second language learner at a disadvantage.

During the social and psychological stages of development, the child learns much vicariously and by modeling those to whom there is an emotional bond. Many attitudes and feelings experienced by the parent are thus incorporated by the child. Parents are particularly influential in the area of second language learning as their attitude toward the target language and culture will either facilitate or inhibit their child's learning (Saville-Troike, 1973, 1975; Schumann, 1975).

Examination of social-psychological factors in second language learning has resulted in several varying theoretical perspectives. One such perspective holds that an individual who comes from a traditional culture experiences specific conflicts while attempting to make the transition to a more modern one (Clarke, 1976). Culture and language shock are explained by Clarke as a "clash

of consciousness," or rather, difference in perceptions of daily experiences.

Similarly, bilingual individuals may experience a problem of "conflicting allegiances" (Lambert 1972). One example is the aspect of language loyalty. In a study where the extent of language loyalty was investigated in a sample of Mexican Americans residing in an Austin, Texas community, it was found that first generation Spanish speakers had maintained intraethnic communications in Spanish, while second and third-generation Spanish speakers had maintained a significantly lesser degree of Spanish communication (Thompson, 1971).

Still another conflict-causing aspect stems from barriers created as a result of unaccepting attitudes toward a child's native language. A child who has experienced negative acceptance of the native language in the school and community may react by refusing to speak the native language in the home. Parents and other family members who have not yet learned the new language may be frustrated and angered by this rejection since it implicitly signals to them that the child considers them or their ways to be inferior (Brown, 1973).

However, language shift does not always indicate rejection of a person's own ethnic group (Guitart, 1981). Many members of ethnic groups have little or no proficiency in the native language but nevertheless have maintained cultural patterns. Again, it appears that the notion of social attitudes has a significant effect on maintaining or rejecting one's cultural ways and consequently, a new language.

The second language learner must perceive the differences between the customs and values of the native and new cultures and must decide to what degree assimilation and acculturation will occur. This decision in turn determines the amount of social distance between groups. Such factors as group cohesiveness, cultural similarity, self-concept, and attitude all affect social distance and inevitably determine the rate of second language acquisition (Brown, 1973).

We have heard and read what many would just as soon regard as excuses, but which others would view as viable considerations for language acquisition failures and successes. What is actually being witnessed among our minority children in the schools is a product of more than just excuses. It is a combination of psychological and social factor impact. We, through our educational system, perpetuate the myth of equal educational

opportunity when in reality, many of our children are a few steps behind realizing "equality." It has become a phrase too easily manipulated in an attempt to rectify the socially unjust, to compensate where there has been little compensation, and to compromise where there should be no compromise less than equal to the reality of existing need. We hope that in this decade and in decades to come, we will realize a more integrative and interdisciplinary approach to remediating educational system deficiencies inherited by our language minority children. Only then can we in clear conscience attempt to alleviate existing deficiencies and deliver a more comprehensive and defensible approach to educating the language minority child.

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